GOOD FRIDAY
7TH WORD

4/23/93 - Good Friday Communion Service

REUNION
LUKE 23:44-49

At no time do words seem so terribly inadequate - as this: this moment - when we reflect on the death of Jesus Christ and his loud, last cry. "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." There are times when men ought to weap the bitter tears of grief and joy instead of talking. This is one of those times. In that spirit - before I do what talking I need to do - allow me to share with you a prayer, written by Michel Quoist, under the title "Jesus dies on the Cross."

A few hours more,
A few minutes more,
A few instants more.
For thirty-three years it has been going on
For thirty-three years you have lived fully minute after minute.
You can no longer escape, now; you are there, at the end of your life, at the end of your road.
You are at the last extremity, at the edge of a precipice.
You must take the last step,
The last step of love,
The last step of life that ends in death.
You hesitate . . . .
Three hours are long, three hours of agony,
Longer than three years of life
Longer than thirty years of life.

You must decide, Lord, all is ready around you.
You are there, motionless, on your Cross,
You have renounced all activity other than embracing these crossed planks for which you were made.
And yet, there is still life in your nailed body.
Let mortal flesh die, and make way for Eternity.

Now, life slips from each limb, one by one, finding refuge
in his still-beating heart,
Immeasurable heart,
Overflowing heart,
Heart heavy as the world, the world of sins and miseries that
it bears.

Lord, one more effort.
Mankind is there, waiting unknowingly for the cry of its Saviour.
Your brothers are there; they need you.
Your Father bends over you, already holding out his arms.
Lord, save us,
Save us.

See.
He has taken his heavy heart.
And
Slowly,
Laborously,

Alone between heaven and earth,
In the awesome night,
With passionate love,
He has gathered his life,
He has gathered the sin of the world.
And in a cry,
He has given ALL.
"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Christ has just died for us.

When Robert McAfee Brown was at Union Theological Seminary his fellow professor and close friend, David Roberts, died. One week later Brown wrote an essay, A Fragmentary Adventure in Grace in which he said: ".....his death, which at first seemed to me totally bad, has become a sacramental means of grace for me, and in that sense at least has shown forth the love and the goodness and the mercy of God. In the midst of the deepest sorrow I have yet known in this life, God has been pleased to reveal to me something of his love and grace.." (P.165 The Pseudonyms of God)

That, in essence, is the reason we are here this afternoon. The death of Jesus Christ may loom as the most monstrous crime in history: and yet, at the same time, it is the very best thing that ever happened to you and me. That which, on the one hand, is totally bad, becomes for us a means of grace, the supreme demonstration of God's love for us. His last words, before he died, become words of significance - because there was far more happening on Calvary than a tragic martyrdom.

"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." Those are words of courage, not - as has sometimes been suggested, words of stoic resignation. They come from the Psalter, which Jesus learned as a child and used all his life. Once before, on the cross, he had reached back into the history of his people - from Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And now, at the moment of death, a stanza from the 31st Psalm. That particular Psalm is peculiar: its meter is most irregular: the man who wrote it was in deep trouble: and his thoughts come tumbling out - not in sequence, yet they affirm, time and time again that greatest of Israel's truths - that God is present in adversity; that regardless of what was happening historically, all will be well ultimately. It is an act of quiet and singular courage to affirm that at the moment of death.

We need to remember that crucifixion was specifically designed for more than execution. Cicero ~~Cecino~~ called it the most horrible punishment

possible. The Romans did not inflict it on their own citizens. It was reserved, rather, for barbarians, foreigners, traitors - the despicable scum of the earth who needed to be humiliated and broken as well executed. And it was marveouslly effective. Men cursed at their executioners from the cross: men pled and begged and screamed and finally babbled incoherently.

When he was in Dachau, Martin Niemöller, could see the gallows from his cell, and day after day watched and listened as prisoners were put to death. Later he could observe that "the gallows became my most reliable teacher. There were always two questions in my mind: What will happen on the day they lead you there and put you to the test? When they put that rope around your neck, what will be your last words? Will you cry out, "You crimminals,scum! There's a God in heaven! You'll get yours!'? And the other question was, What would have happened if Jesus had said it, if He had taken his last breath to cry out to the soldiers and the Sanhedrin, 'Crimminals, scum! This is my father's world. You'll get yours!'?"
(He speaks from the Cross, P.19-20)

Instead he said "Forgive them" - "Today you will be with me in paradise" - "Woman, behold your son"-and- "Father into thy hands I commit my spirit" Is it any wonder then that a centurian, a rough, courageous man himself, used to seeing people die, said, "Surely this man was innocent - surely this man was the Son of God"?

Quiet courage these words speak. Not brash - boistrous: but strong - honest - unbending - proud - inspiring.

In the play Will Shakespear, Queen Elizabeth says:

"I'll not bow
To the gentle Jesus of the women, I....
But to the man who hung twixt earth and heaven
Six mortal hours and knew the end (as strength
and custom was) three days away, yet ruled
His soul and body so, that when the sponge
Blessed his cracked lips with promise of relief

And quick oblivion, He would not drink
He turned His head away and would not drink
Spat out the anodyne And would not drink;
This was a God for kings and queens with pride,
And Him I follow." (Clemence Dane)

Courage, but also trust. "Father, into thy hands..." Jesus taught us to call God father. "Our father, who art in heaven..." Martin Luther, commenting on the Lord'sPrayer called them, "friendly, sweet and tender words." Men have filled libraries with the synonyms, pseudonyms and intellectual definitions of God. Theologians have piled adjective upon adjective in an attempt to contain the reality of God within the perimiters of the human intellect. Jesus said "Father". "Abba Father" which remains untranslated because the closest English equivalent is "Daddy". God is personal, intimate, loving - as a father is to his own children. And the bond between him and his children is one of trust.

Thomas Wolfe once wrote: "The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living, was man's search for a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."

To live through the death of one's own father is to know the reality of that. To have a father is to have someone to trust: someone to whom to go: someone with whom to share. Not that fathers are omnipotent. Anyone who has one or is one knows that a Father's power is limited by his very fatherhood. Fathers can't always protect their children from harm. In fact, the very essence of fatherhood is loving and letting go, loving and granting freedom and then loving all the more. A father is one who comes running down the road after us when we've been in the far country: one whose love is not altered by our performance: one whose love so shares

our hurts that somehow pain becomes bearable and life liveable. The last words of Jesus are elloquent affirmation that we are not orphans in the universe: we are not alone: we have a Father.

My own son taught me what it means to trust his father. We were going for measle innoculations, and had prepared them all by saying we were going to get a shot. He was unusually quiet in the car. Instead of running ahead with the others he held my hand and insisted on staying beside me throughout. Afterward he was still quiet, and in the car, on the way home, he said: "Daddy, Am I going to be with God now?" And suddenly we realized that to him "shot" had meant guns and pain and dying. But that he walked right into it trusting.

Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit. Courage - trust - and peace.

Paul Tillich once observed that the face of everyman bears the image of death: and that we are not free until we deal with that. And many philosophers and theologians have identified our awareness of and our fear of death as the source of dread, anxiety and despair. "Peace" - ? What peace ? "Peace of mind" = fares rather well so long as it is superficial: but it comes crashing down the minute we contemplate our own death.

Jesus Christ died. That is the very best news of all: that's what makes this a "Good" friday: that's what brings peace - peace that passes understanding within our grasp.

When his friend Charles Williams died, C. S. Lewis wrote: "No event has so corroborated my faith in the mext world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed." (R.M.Brown, The Pseudonymns of God. P. 160)

So, this afternoon, as we come to the conclusion of our vigil, I invite you to contemplate your own death. And to meet that idea in your mind with another idea: Jesus Christ dying and saying, "Father - into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Jesus Christ died for us. He died to set us free from the fear of

of death; he died to demonstrate the extravagance of God's love; he died to give us peace.

No one pondered the mystery and wonder of it all more than St. Paul. And he could write:

> "For I am sure that neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
>
> Courage - Trust - Peace
>
> "O death, where is thy victory?
> O death, where is thy sting?
> Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory. AMEN

Father, we have said all we know to say. Help us now, as we leave, to know that the world is a different place because of this day. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN